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Populism and Foreign Policy: The Case of India

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What kind of foreign policy do populists execute once in power? Based on the existing literature, we conceptualize populism as a set of ideas whose two core elements are anti-elitism and antipluralism. From this we develop a set of hypotheses regarding both substantive aspects of foreign policy as well as foreign policy-making processes of populist leaders in government. An analysis of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's foreign policy record serves as a first plausibility probe of our hypotheses. We find that our concept of populism carries most explanatory value in the procedural aspects of foreign policy making as well as in its communication, less so in those aspects relating to the goals or substance of foreign policy. Whereas foreign policy under Modi's populist leadership is highly centralized and personalized, the traditional foreign policy establishment, including most notably the Ministry of External Affairs, has lost some of its previous authority. Engaging the Indian diaspora abroad emerged as another characteristic of populist foreign policy making. By contrast, the case of India does not confirm our hypothesis regarding a preference of bilateralism over multilateralism, nor does populism necessarily preclude investing in global public goods.

Introduction

What kind of foreign policy will populists pursue once they come to power and form governments? This question is increasingly pressing against the backdrop of

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the ascent to power of populists in a range of countries. Nonetheless, the topic of “populist” foreign policy has remained surprisingly understudied. Recent media contributions are obviously grappling with the populist elements in US President Donald Trump’s foreign policy, but more systematic, theory-driven analyses of the implications of populists in power for a country’s foreign policy are lacking. This is surprising since, in many parts of the world, populism has emerged as a reaction to some elements of globalization (Liang 2007, 8–10; Chrysogelos 2017) or, in the West, to the perceived growing influence of international institutions and “international bureaucracies” (Zürn 2004, 285). At the same time, the concept of populism is highly contested, thereby forcing us to ask if there actually is anything like a specifically “populist” foreign policy and, if so, what its features might be.

To address this question, we proceed as follows: first, based on the extensive literature on the conceptualization and definition of populism, we outline what our understanding of populism is—a set of ideas whose two core elements are anti-elitism and antipluralism. In a second step, we derive a range of hypotheses on how the rise to power of populist forces will likely affect different aspects of a country’s foreign policy. We then carry out a first plausibility probe of our hypotheses (Eckstein 1975, 108–13), and we choose the case of India for our empirical assessment.

There are several reasons why India is an ideal case for this exercise. With the electoral victory of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)¹ in 2014 and the inauguration of Narendra Modi as India’s prime minister, we saw the rise to power of a genuinely populist leader. A period of almost four years in government (2014–18) is long enough to allow us to distinguish some patterns in foreign policy under Modi’s government. Cases with a shorter time frame, such as President Rodrigo Duterte of the Philippines, would be less useful. Moreover, as will be illustrated below, India’s previous coalition governments under the leadership of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh (2004–14) of the Indian National Congress (INC or Congress) do not count as populist according to our definition and can therefore be used as a point of reference to assess potential shifts toward a populist foreign policy under Modi. This clear-cut transition from a nonpopulist to a populist leader makes India a more useful case as compared to other cases in which the transition toward populism was more gradual—think of Turkey, where, according to our definition, Erdoğan became populist over time by gradually adding ever stronger antipluralist elements to his anti-elitist rhetoric. Moreover, comparisons between Modi’s foreign policy and that of the BJP-led government of Atal Bihari Vajpayee (1998–2004) will allow us to distinguish between the populist elements in Modi’s foreign policy and the broader ideological features related to the BJP’s Hindu nationalist ideology. Finally, the scant literature on populism and foreign policy so far almost exclusively deals with cases from Europe and the Americas. The case of India thus highlights populism’s salience globally and promises to broaden our understanding of the phenomenon. Based on the results of our plausibility probe, the final section of the paper suggests some refinements to our hypotheses and outlines avenues for further research.

The Concept of Populism

“Populism” is a highly contested concept whose usefulness as an analytical category has been repeatedly called into question (Laclau 2007, 3; Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017, 2–5). Past studies of populism from the 1960s–1980s, many of them based on Latin American cases, tended to conceptualize populism in *economic-structuralist terms*, assuming a connection between delayed dependent development, certain social constituencies (e.g., organized workers), and specific distributive policies (for an overview, see Weyland 2001, 4–9). The emergence of personalistic populist

¹The BJP won 51.7 percent of the seats in the lower house of the Indian Parliament.

leaders who did *not* pursue such “irresponsible” economic policies ultimately called into question such definitions (Roberts 1995). Scholars like Weyland (2001, 14, emphasis added) instead chose to define populism as a “*political strategy* through which a personalistic leader seeks or exercises government power based on direct, unmediated, uninstitutionalized support from large numbers of mostly unorganized followers.” This definition has several elements in common with the understanding of populism adopted in this article. Yet, by assuming the existence of unorganized masses and excluding institutionalized populist parties, it is rather narrow, which makes it difficult to apply to more recent cases such as European right-wing populist parties. It also risks equating populism with demagoguery, thereby leading to a loss of conceptual clarity (Aslanidis 2016, 96). Authors like Moffitt and Tormey (2014, 391–93) instead understand populism as a *political style* and inductively identify its core elements: an appeal to “the people”; a perception and a performance (Moffitt 2015) of crisis, breakdown, and threat; and “bad manners.” This approach has the advantage of including both left- and right-wing populists and of capturing interesting facets of the political style and communication of contemporary populist leaders like Trump or Duterte, but it tends to downplay the ideational elements that are common to populists across the political spectrum.

Some more recent definitions of populism, which have substantially shaped the current debate, capture the commonalities of populist movements and leaders across the political spectrum by conceptualizing populism as a “thin-centred ideology” (Mudde 2004, 544). For the purpose of developing hypotheses on the impact of populism on foreign policy, such a focus on the essential ideational underpinnings of populism—as opposed to specific domestic economic policies, strategic mobilization features, or stylistic elements of domestic politics—is particularly useful. In fact, as we will see, such sets of ideas will allow us to develop some more specific expectations for the field of foreign policy.

Among the definitions of populism that focus on its ideational dimension, those by Mudde (2004; 2016) and Müller (2016) are widespread and largely overlapping, and they build upon several aspects of the broader literature mentioned above. We stick to the leaner conceptualization provided by Müller as it only encompasses two core dimensions, but we also relate it to Mudde’s work. Populism, according to Müller, entails two necessary and jointly sufficient dimensions: *anti-elitism* and *antipluralism*. By understanding populism as a “thin” ideology, such a conceptualization allows us to identify the commonalities of populist movements and leaders across the political spectrum. In fact, the two basic elements of anti-elitism and antipluralism can and typically do coexist with other, “thicker” ideological elements such as socialism or, as we will see for the case of India, Hindu nationalism.

The first essential feature of populists is their criticism of elites in highly moralistic terms. As Mudde (2016, 26) puts it, populism conjures up a separation of society into “two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ and ‘the corrupt elite.’” The moralistic dimension of populist discourse reflects a tendency to depict the will of the “people” as good and elites as “evil” (Mudde 2004, 543). Relatedly, populists often portray themselves or the “people” as victims—and they sometimes continue to do so even after they come to power. In such a Manichean imaginary, “majorities act as mistreated minorities” (Müller 2016, 42), and enemy images are kept alive so that in some cases “governing [is] a permanent campaign” (43). Depending on the thick ideology espoused by different populists, the “elites” can be representatives of the political establishment (think of Trump’s attack on “Washington” in his inauguration speech), of a domestic oligarchy (Thaksin’s criticism of the aristocratic network *Amaat* in Thailand), but also the EU bureaucracy (for right-wing populist parties in Europe) or transnational capital (for left-wing Latin American populists). Disregard for the elite typically is underlined by claims to the need for and promise of a “rupture” with the existing *unjust* order” (Panizza and

Miorelli 2009, 40; emphasis in the original), as exemplified by Trump's campaign promise to "drain the swamp."

The second core feature of populism, antipluralism, refers to the fact that populist leaders claim to speak in the name of the people and that "they, and they alone, represent the people" (Müller 2016, 3). Discerning the "righteous and morally pure" (3) people routinely excludes certain sections of the population from this definition. This does not mean that antipluralism always coincides with nativism (Mudde 2007, 13–14). Left-wing populists usually will not pursue an ethnonationalist agenda. However, once they claim that only they can speak for the true people, this automatically excludes political opponents and their constituencies. In its most extreme form, such "denial of diversity effectively amounts to denying the status of certain citizens as free and equal. These citizens might not be excluded officially, but the public legitimacy of their individual values, ideas of what makes for the good life, and even material interests are effectively called into question" (Müller 2016, 82). The tendency to denigrate political competitors, arguing that they "might not be part of the proper people to begin with" (20), relates to another feature of populism: Populists typically regard intermediating institutions—from parliament to courts and particularly the media—with skepticism, as such institutions stand in the way between the true representative and his or her people. In fact, they "assume that 'the people' can . . . issue something like an imperative mandate that tells politicians exactly what they have to do when in government" (31). Naturally, new communication media allowing for direct channels between the leader and the people are endorsed enthusiastically by populists, while traditional media "are accused . . . of 'mediating' [and thereby] distorting political reality" (35)—think of Italian Beppe Grillo's use of his blog to directly learn about the "people's" wishes.

Developing Hypotheses on Populism and Foreign Policy

So far, little attention has been paid to populists' foreign policy. Two notable exceptions are Chrysogelos (2017) and Verbeek and Zaslove (2017). Both argue, as we do, in favor of an understanding of populism as a thin ideology. However, Chrysogelos (2017) does not go so far as to explicitly theorize populist foreign policy and empirically assess the validity of his thoughts. By contrast, Verbeek and Zaslove (2017) make the most systematic attempt so far at developing hypotheses on the foreign-policy positions of populist parties, arguing that populists' political orientation—that is, the "thick ideology" they relate to—ultimately shapes their specific foreign-policy preferences, as well as their more or less isolationist versus cosmopolitan attitude. However, they find it difficult to identify common traits of a truly "populist" foreign policy, and, importantly, they refrain from focusing on populists in power. The rest of the literature on populism and foreign policy is mostly based on insights from single case studies and also has a clearly Eurocentric or "Western" bias.² Nevertheless, some studies from the field of foreign policy analysis offer interesting insights into anti-elitist actors and their foreign policy preferences (e.g., Mead 2011; Rathbun 2013) or on populist radical right parties and their influence on foreign policy as junior coalition partners (e.g., Verbeek and Zaslove 2015).

Instead of trying to gain insights from idiosyncratic cases, we chose to deductively develop hypotheses on the basis of the ideational features of populism outlined above. We specifically focus on the foreign policy pursued by populists in power. The underlying assumption is that populists in power will pursue policies that reflect their mandate across a range of issue areas, including foreign policy. Since we aim to identify potential features of *populist* foreign policy in a general sense,

² See Liang (2007) and Balfour et al. (2016). One notable exception is Dodson and Dorraj (2008).

independent of the underlying thick ideology, we develop our hypotheses based on the two core dimensions of anti-elitism and antipluralism. In our plausibility probe for the Indian case, we will explore to what extent such hypotheses on the impact of populism as a thin ideology find confirmation and to what extent the thick ideology of Hindu nationalism needs to be taken into account as an explanatory factor. The introduction of a relatively high number of hypotheses is related to the exploratory character of this study, which should be understood as a first effort at theorizing populist foreign policy. A plausibility probe for a large number of hypotheses is the most useful way to approach a so far understudied topic and to identify which avenues for further research and theorizing are the most promising.

Our first hypothesis relates populists' antipluralist and anti-elitist claim of representing the people to their foreign-policy engagement on global governance issues. Populists in power will likely use a rhetoric that explicitly refers to the "popular will" and directly links their foreign policy with an engagement for "the people." This peculiar insistence on the will of the people can be expected to entail a particularly strong prioritization of the (narrowly understood) "national interest" (Chrysosgelos 2017). Generally speaking, this might, in turn, involve a decreased readiness to contribute to the provision of global public goods, which by definition implies also considering the well-being of persons beyond one's own narrow community or constituency. Such measures entail high costs, while their benefits may not be of immediate relevance to "the people" defined in anti-elitist and antipluralist terms. This can lead to a limited willingness to engage in issue areas of global governance that potentially involve high spending of blood and treasure or costs for economic development, for example climate change mitigation, conflict management, or peace-keeping. In other fields, such as trade liberalization, the interpretation provided by populist leaders will codepend on their parties' underlying thick ideologies; hence, for example, not all populists will necessarily be protectionists. *Our first hypothesis therefore suggests that populists in power will be less likely to make concessions on global governance issues that entail high costs of blood and treasure as compared to nonpopulist governments.*

Our second hypothesis refers to international institution building and multilateralism, which can be expected to be particularly difficult to engage in for populists in power. For one, international institutions—like intermediate institutions domestically—stand in the way between the populist leader and his or her people by introducing rules and potentially constraining his or her room to maneuver. As displayed by populist parties in Eastern and Southern Europe, populists often regard international organizations as a product of a transnational elite and, relatedly, as a threat to "the people" and to national sovereignty. By contrast, bilateral leader-level agreements, which allow the leader to directly convey the supposed will of the people and also clearly exhibit the leader's claim for status as the sole legitimate representative of "the real people," can be expected to be the preferred modus operandi for populists in power. The insistence on the defense of national sovereignty and the claim of exclusive representation may also complicate international institution building. *We can therefore hypothesize (second) that populists in power are likely to privilege bilateralism over multilateralism.*

While populists primarily identify the people in domestic terms, it is worthwhile exploring if populists extend this essential notion beyond their nation's borders. Populists in power may be induced to translate their domestically successful attachment and habitual reference to the "people" to foreign affairs by way of expanding their notion of the very people they claim to represent. And if they understood the "people" in broader transnational terms, this would certainly have an impact on their foreign policy. Anecdotal evidence suggests that populists sometime speak to a transnational constituency that involves the diaspora population. President Erdoğan's claim to represent supposedly oppressed people of Turkish descent from Western Europe to China is illustrative. Directly addressing the diaspora might

reflect populists' disregard for intermediary institutions that separate them from the people. It might also be an expression of populists' attempts to make foreign policy look less elitist. While the diaspora can be expected to be a preferred transnational extension of the people for populists with a nationalist ideological background, there may be different understandings of a transnational "people" associated with a leftist or anti-imperialist thick ideology. In fact, some populist leaders have aimed to speak for a broader transnational people as opposed to some oppressing power or elite in world politics (Chrysogelos 2017). We therefore propose the explorative hypothesis that *populists in power will be more likely than their nonpopulist counterparts to develop a transnational understanding of their "people" and to engage such a transnational audience in their foreign policy (third hypothesis).*

We argue that populism can also be expected to have an impact on the very way in which foreign policy is made. While we have generally seen a growing role of heads of state and government in foreign policy in recent years,³ populists' tendency to portray a singular leader as the embodiment of the people suggests an even more centralized decision-making process with fewer opportunities for the expression of a plurality of alternative perspectives in foreign policy making than elsewhere. Moreover, we can expect populists in government to be skeptical of the established elite in the field of foreign policy: diplomats. Due to its professional formation and the elitist traditions attached to it, the diplomatic corps will likely appear suspicious to a populist leader and his followers. As an illustration, consider that under President Trump an unprecedented number of senior positions within the State Department have remained vacant, and Secretary of State Tillerson himself was a novice with a colossal budget cut on his immediate agenda. We can thus expect populists in power to surround themselves with other kinds of experts and possibly also to break established conventions of diplomatic etiquette. *We therefore hypothesize (fourth) that the decision-making process in the foreign policy of populists in power will be more centralized and personalistic with fewer formalized opportunities for alternative viewpoints than under a nonpopulist leadership.*

Finally, we can expect the "true people" as the exclusive reference combined with populists' disregard for established intermediary institutions—the press, parliament, or the judiciary—to precipitate creativity in populists' adoption of new ways for involving their constituency, also on foreign policy matters. New communication technology allows populists to devise novel forms of direct communication, thereby (at least rhetorically) making foreign policy less elitist. *Our fifth hypothesis thus suggests that populist in power will be more likely to adopt unconventional ways of directly relating their foreign policy to "the people," including, in particular, via social media.*

Populism in India

Before moving on to our plausibility probe of the five hypotheses on populist foreign policy, in this section we provide a recapitulation of the salience and meanings of populism in the political history of independent India. In fact, the term populism has a long history in the Indian context, often denoting the distribution of economic benefits to various subgroups of the electorate.⁴ Typically, historians and political scientists consider two kinds of political forces to be populist: on the national level, Indira Gandhi's first and second term as prime minister and, on the regional level, movements and parties representing particular linguistic and caste groups (Subramanian 2007).⁵ Although regional populism incorporates integral

³ See, for instance, Cooper, Heine, and Thakur (2013).

⁴ On the "populism" of other Indian politicians, see Subramanian (2007, 82) and Jaffreot and Tillin (2017). For "populist strategies" adopted by the BJP in the 1980s and early 90s, see in particular Jaffreot (1996).

⁵ Populism on the regional level first emerged in competition to Indira Gandhi's Congress (Jaffreot and Tillin 2017, 189; Kenny 2017, chapter 6; Hansen 1999, chapter 4).

elements of the concept of populism employed in this article, it is of lesser importance to our analysis for two reasons. First, albeit frequently “in power” on the national level through coalition politics from the late 1980s onward, regional parties affected foreign policy only sporadically. Second, whereas regional populists have employed an anti-elitist, pro-poor discourse, in national politics they remain powerful voices in defense of pluralism, rather than the opposite.

Thus, more relevant for the purpose of this paper is Indira Gandhi’s populism on the national stage, which vividly employed a strategy of anti-elitism. Paradoxically, the daughter of India’s founding father and first prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru managed to portray herself as anti-elitist by delegitimizing the establishment of her own party and claiming not only to represent the people but even to personify the Indian nation itself (Guha 2007, 548). In her speeches, the “old” Congress was portrayed as “conservative elements” in thrall to “vested interests,” whereas her platform was committed to the poor (447). Placing loyal individuals in positions of authority and eroding party as well as state institutions to the benefit of her own authority were the hallmarks of Indira Gandhi’s rule from the split of Congress to the proclamation of emergency in 1975—a measure she justified as a “necessary response to the deep and widespread conspiracy which has been brewing ever since I began to introduce certain progressive measures of benefit to the common man and woman of India” (quoted in Guha 2007, 493).

However, whereas Indira Gandhi exhibited important elements of populism, antipluralism was not part of her political strategy. To the contrary, by promoting clientelism and personal loyalty over party structure and in order to expand her electoral base, Indira Gandhi’s leadership is widely regarded as contributing to the rise of caste-, tribal-, or religious-based politics in the 1980s (Hansen 1999, 136, 150). And albeit presiding over a traumatic and violent campaign against militant Sikhs pressing for self-rule in 1984, Indira Gandhi, like her father, was “genuinely non-parochial, seeking to represent all Indians, regardless of their gender or class, or religious and linguistic affiliation” (Guha 2007, 573).

Likewise, although the two most recent Congress-led governments under Manmohan Singh were sometimes dubbed “populist” in the Indian discourse, they neither reflected Indira Gandhi’s anti-elitism and centralization of leadership nor antipluralism. Quite to the contrary, the Nehru-Gandhi dynasty at the helm of the Congress party was the embodiment of India’s political elite. Moreover, the Congress rather consistently stuck to the long-held principles of secularism and pluralism. Although episodes of religious violence took place also in the years 2004–14, the government and its supporters did not systematically try to reshape the understanding of the Indian nation by redefining the Indian “people” through the exclusion of specific groups.

By contrast, the Indian government under Prime Minister Modi can be considered populist as it clearly entails both constitutive dimensions of populism: anti-elitism and antipluralism. The electoral victory of the BJP in 2014 came after a series of corruption scandals that tainted the image of the INC. The desire to replace corrupt elites and to put an end to India’s dynastic politics was a core element in Modi’s electoral success. Modi himself—the son of a tea-seller—embodied such anti-elitism. For instance, mocking the INC candidate Rahul Gandhi, the scion of the Gandhi-Nehru family, as a “prince” was a common feature during his campaign. In their analysis of the 2014 national election campaign, Chakravarty and Roy (2015, 315) find that the BJP media team cultivated the party’s role as an underdog against the hereditary and corrupt political establishment in the form of Congress, “spending unprecedented amounts on an ‘advertising blitz,’” and attacking the established media outlets, particularly English language ones. After Modi came to power, the notion of fighting corrupt, impure, and spiritually malformed elites in politics, economics, and society became a key component of the ascetic celibate’s rhetoric.

Modi also claims to be representing “the people.” Before elections in India’s most populous state, Uttar Pradesh, in March 2017, he effectively told the people to vote for his BJP—and let him choose their leader afterward.⁶ Responding to critics of his decision to suddenly withdraw most of the currency in circulation in November 2016, he declared: “On one hand, there are these intellectuals who talk about Harvard, and on the other, there is this son of a poor mother, who is trying to change the economy of the country through hard work” (quoted in [Rodrigues and Pradhan 2017](#)). A recent quantitative analysis of Modi’s and his predecessors’ Independence Day speeches reveals that the peculiarity of Modi’s rhetoric lies in his direct appeals to the audience. “Accordingly, words like ‘you,’ ‘brother,’ ‘sister,’ ‘friend,’ ‘people,’ and ‘mother’ best define Modi’s language” ([Jaffrelot and Martelli 2017](#))—and this “rhetorical technique is inherent in populism, a version of politics that crystallises when a leader tries to relate directly to ‘his’ nation” ([Jaffrelot and Martelli 2017](#)). By contrast, references to India’s founding prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru—widely considered a symbol for India’s success as a multicultural nation—were conspicuously absent at the most recent celebrations of India’s seventy years of independence. Instead, the BJP’s general secretary, Ram Madhav, used the occasion to denounce Nehru for representing “the ideas that . . . were transmitted by the colonisers from the west.” Whereas Nehru’s education in Cambridge and London separated him from the people, today “[the] mob, humble people of the country, are behind Modi. They are finally at ease with a government that looks and sounds familiar. They are enjoying it” ([Madhav 2017](#)). Not unlike Indira Gandhi, populist mobilization under Modi has also affected the way his own party works. Consider that despite the BJP’s comparatively strong institutionalization, Modi’s authority clearly and significantly supersedes party networks ([Jaffrelot and Tillin 2017](#), 187); for instance, during the 2014 campaign senior BJP leader Advani was sidelined and the campaign concentrated on Modi personally.⁷

Besides anti-elitism and Modi’s efforts to directly relate to “the people,” antipluralism and exclusionary identity politics have become increasingly visible in India since 2014. The BJP is part of a group of Hindu nationalist organizations following the doctrine of *Hindutva*, according to which Indian identity is to be equated with the Hindu civilization and Hinduism ([Jaffrelot 2017](#), 52–53)—to the detriment of religious minority groups, primarily Muslims. Modi himself has a history of ambivalent association with religious violence: the failure to prevent massive anti-Muslim pogroms when he was chief minister of the state of Gujarat earned him a travel ban to the United States in 2005. Religious polarization was an important element in his subsequent election campaigns in Gujarat ([Kenny 2017](#), 137; [Jaffrelot and Tillin 2017](#), 185). As prime minister, Modi has paid lip service to religious tolerance, and the antipluralist discourse emerging in India has only rarely been openly promoted by Modi himself but has been promoted by his surrogates, such as BJP party chief Amit Shah and others ([Kenny 2017](#), 139).⁸ High-ranking BJP politicians have time and again promoted a majoritarian Hindu culture, be it by conducting electoral campaigns with Hindu nationalist undertones, by calling for the declaration of the *Bhagavad Gita* as India’s “national scripture,” or by renaming a street previously named after a Mughal emperor. Under Modi, *Hindutva* vigilante groups have become increasingly open in their campaigns against cow slaughtering, religious conversion, or an alleged “love-Jihad” by Muslim men trying to seduce Hindu girls.

⁶The choice turned out to be Yogi Adityanath, a hardline Hindu nationalist priest known for his inflammatory anti-Muslim rhetoric and actions.

⁷As one national-level BJP Youth Wing functionary put it in an interview with one of the authors in 2015: “Modi’s agenda is the BJP’s agenda.”

⁸One notable exception is a statement during the election campaign in the state of Uttar Pradesh, where in early 2017 Modi hinted at an unjust privileging of Muslims to the detriment of Hindus on the part of the state ([Verma 2017](#)). By contrast, former BJP Prime Minister Vajpayee (1998–2004), as well as his first minister of external affairs, Jaswant Singh, are typically described as belonging to a “moderate” wing within the BJP.

Several states passed legislation criminalizing the sale and the possession of beef or hampering religious conversions and in July 2016 the BJP tabled a new citizenship amendment bill in Parliament, which proposes easing the procedure for the acquisition of Indian citizenship for Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains, Parsis, and Christians fleeing religious persecution in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Bangladesh—thereby explicitly excluding Muslim refugees and reflecting the BJP’s electoral promise to make India “the natural home of persecuted Hindus around the world” (Medha 2016, 1). Antipluralism—even though not explicitly promoted by Modi as a national leader but by prominent members of his party and by a host of organizations surrounding it—is clearly an important component of Modi’s populism.

Hindu Nationalism and Populism

In order to gauge Modi’s populism’s effects on foreign policy, it is important to differentiate between the BJP’s “thick” elements of ideology, including their ramifications for foreign policy, and populism’s combination of antipluralism and anti-elitism.

The core of the BJP ideology is encapsulated in the term *Hindutva*. Its origins can be found in writings by authors such as V. D. Savarkar, M. S. Golwalkar, and Deendayal Upadhyaya, some of whom were heavily influenced by modernist nationalist thinkers in the West (Hansen 1999, 77–89). Yet, *Hindutva* remains a fuzzy concept, hard to pin down even according to its proponents (Hansen 1999, 77, 81). Besides a belief in Hinduism’s ancient glory, spiritual superiority, and universal mission, important elements found in its representatives’ writings as well as BJP party rhetoric include a sense of Hindu victimization and fear of Muslims; a commitment to “cleanliness,” social harmony, and natural authority; and a celebration of (Hindu) masculinity. Of those, the stigmatization of (alien) Muslims and a corresponding victimization of Hindus clearly dominates the public imaginary.⁹ A history of violent partition along religious lines, the constant state of conflict vis-à-vis neighboring Pakistan, the rise of Muslim political identities throughout the 1980s, and India’s reservation policies benefitting minorities all contributed to the Hindu nationalists’ consistent portrayal of majority Hindus as victims in their own lands. As Jaffrelot puts it, “[this] strategy is the cornerstone of the Hindu nationalist movement; it was the first to be formulated and sustains its ideology” (1996, 522).

Correspondingly, the “cleanliness” promised by the BJP (Hansen 1999, 221) and other Hindu nationalist organizations ranges from saving Hinduism from impure (Muslim and Christian) “infiltration” to the “protection” of Hindu women, fighting corruption, and actually cleaning India’s (holy) rivers and public spaces. In foreign policy, “[the] BJP dream of gaining for India global recognition and a rightful place among the leading powers requires supplanting Gandhi-Nehru effeminate and non-violent essentialism with images of Hindu masculinity and martial-endowments” (Chaulia 2002, 220). The Vajpayee government’s decision to conduct five nuclear tests in 1998, a long-standing BJP demand, can be attributed in part to Hindu nationalists’ emphasis of muscularity and independence in international relations.

The understanding of Hinduism as a unique and morally superior civilization based on ancient traditions and mythology informs a specific kind of Indian exceptionalism externally (Sullivan 2014; Nymalm and Plagemann 2018) and, as laid out above, antipluralism domestically. On the other hand, the anti-elitism in our conceptualization of populism does not come natural to the BJP’s “thick” ideology of *Hindutva*. Indeed, the BJP traditionally relied on the support of upper castes, a fact that has significantly limited the party’s electoral success pre-Modi (Jaffrelot

⁹ Based on extensive fieldwork in northern India, Hansen concludes that *Hindutva* ultimately amounted to the “assertion of an extremely fuzzy Hinduness vis-à-vis a phantasmagoric construction of a Muslim threat” (Hansen 1999, 194).

1996). Albeit reverberating with Hindu nationalist thought, Modi enriched the BJP agenda with new elements: anti-elitism, anti-corruption, and a focus on good governance for the “people.” This peculiar combination of anti-elitism and antipluralism, which partially builds upon the “thick” Hindu nationalist ideology in defining the “true” people, is what characterizes Modi’s populism.

Populism and Foreign Policy in India

In recent years, the issue of continuity and change in India’s foreign policy under Prime Minister Modi has been the subject of much academic debate (e.g., [Hall 2015](#); [Chatterjee Miller and Sullivan de Estrada 2017](#); [Ganguly 2017](#)). Most studies emphasize continuity in India’s foreign relations both on the regional and global level—with the notable exception of the domestic foreign policy-making process (see below). In this section, we will proceed to assess to what extent the features of Modi’s populism play out in India’s foreign policy and if the shift from a nonpopulist to a populist leader in 2014 led to the hypothesized changes in India’s foreign policy.

Global Governance

Our first hypothesis suggested that populists might be less likely to make concessions on global-governance issues that entail high costs of blood and treasure as compared to nonpopulist governments. For the case of India, this hypothesis does not find confirmation. In fact, few changes on global governance issues could be observed between the Manmohan Singh and the Modi government—and, if there was a shift, this was rather toward a more cooperative approach under Modi.

Indian governments have long paid attention to the potential costs and consequences of public goods provision, which is hardly surprising given India’s character as a developmental state. In international trade negotiations, for example, India has a consistent track record as a difficult actor, unwilling to compromise ([Narlikar 2011](#)). Similarly, on climate governance, India has rejected binding emission targets, highlighting the historical responsibility of industrialized countries and its own need to prioritize industrial development ([MEA 2009](#)). When it comes to contributions in the field of security, India has a long tradition as one of the largest suppliers of troops for UN peacekeeping operations, which have been an important source of revenue but also a symbol of India’s commitment to the United Nations. At the same time, after a phase of interventionism in the 1980s, India has become extremely reluctant on issues of conflict management in its own region ([Destradi 2014](#)), and it has been highly ambivalent concerning the principle of the Responsibility to Protect ([Destradi 2017](#)). All this predates Modi’s rise to power and reflects India’s long-held prioritization of domestic developmental concerns and its commitment to the norms of sovereignty and nonintervention, which are unrelated to the shift toward populism. At the same time, contributing peacekeepers to UN missions has been hailed as reflecting India’s ethos as a “messenger of peace” by the Prime Minister ([Hindu 2017a](#)) and India continues to be amongst the top three contributors worldwide.

Interestingly, on specific topics such as climate change, Modi was rather more inclined to make concessions as compared to his predecessor: at the Paris conference of 2015, Modi even tried “to present [himself] as a facilitator of the Paris agreement [and] played a major role in pioneering a new agenda on renewable sources of energy” ([Narlikar 2017](#), 104). The influential then foreign secretary Subrahmanyam Jaishankar (2016) stated that “an aspiring leading power, at a minimum, needs to expand its global footprint.” He also mentioned Indian contributions to disaster relief and humanitarian assistance, which “have had a resonance that is difficult to quantify” and have “increased respect for India as a global citizen.” In regional security

governance, the Modi government enthusiastically embraced the self-depiction of India as a “net-security provider” within the Indian Ocean that had been developed under the previous government and includes, among others, Indian patrols of some Indian Ocean island states’ exclusive economic zones (Scott 2015). Overall, therefore, we see that a shift to a populist government has not led to a decreased readiness on the part of India to contribute to global (and regional) public goods.

Bilateralism vs. Multilateralism

The Modi government has been notably active in terms of its bilateral diplomacy. Between June 2014 and January 2018, the prime minister managed to go on sixty-five visits abroad (MEA 2018), a remarkable number, with a focus on India’s wider regional neighborhood. Modi’s public relations team also sought to underline his close rapport with key leaders—from China’s Xi Jinping to Japan’s Shinzo Abe and US Presidents Obama and Trump—and the centralization of foreign policy-making procedures in New Delhi (see below) highlights the importance of such personal ties. Yet, it is difficult to identify a clear trend in the prioritization of bilateralism over multilateralism throughout 2014–18.

For one, abandoning international institutions is more easily done for a great power like the United States than for less powerful countries such as India. India’s support for COP21 does not suggest abandoning multilateralism. Likewise, in its engagement with the World Trade Organization, the current government by and large mirrors the qualified engagement of previous administrations (Narlikar 2017). More tellingly perhaps, India’s official foreign policy rhetoric continues to support the UN and its primacy in global politics. For that reason, support for the G20 was as lukewarm under Modi as it was under his predecessor. Although an ideal forum for displaying personal leadership and national weight, Modi not only opposed the expansion of the G20’s agenda beyond crisis management but also argued that it should be subordinated to the UN’s sustainable development agenda (Cooper and Farooq 2016, 96). At the same time, however, Modi has refrained from reinvigorating New Delhi’s bid for a permanent seat in the UN Security Council, a longstanding desire consistent with India’s claim for a more prominent global role.

With the intention to extend its economic reach northward, India (together with Pakistan) gained full membership of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in June 2017, building on efforts made by the previous government. India is amongst the founding members of the Chinese-initiated Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, with the second largest vote share, but vigorously opposes China’s Belt and Road initiative for fear of Chinese intrusion into South Asia. India continues to be an active participant within a variety of BRICS related interactions from the summit level to the level of national security advisors and media or business conferences. In fact, officials routinely describe the BRICS as the international format fitting most closely with India’s aspirations and interests.¹⁰ Yet, such minilateral fora hardly deserve the label “multilateral.” Modi’s abstention from the Non-Aligned Movement’s summit in 2016 was a break with the past, as Indian leaders not only were instrumental in the organization’s creation in 1956 but also remained outspoken supporters in the decades since then. However, there are serious doubts about the organization’s utility in a post-Cold War world. Moreover, historically, the BJP and its predecessors, partly informed by anti-Soviet sentiments, had repeatedly expressed reservations vis-à-vis the movement since the 1950s and, after the end of the Cold War, explicitly stated that nonalignment had become irrelevant (Ghosh 2000, 339).

Regionally, the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) remains dysfunctional due to the dismal state of relations between Pakistan and India. As a response, India in 2016 sought to revive the Bay of Bengal Initiative for

¹⁰ E.g., Minister of State for External Affairs M. J. Akbar on September 15, 2017, at IDSA in New Delhi.

Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC)—a forum comprising all South Asian states except Pakistan—by hosting its members in the context of the BRICS Outreach Summit in Goa, and encouraged a more meaningful Indian Ocean Rim Association; both diplomatic initiatives led some observers to identify a “multilateral turn” in Indian Ocean affairs precipitated by the rise of China (Mohan 2017). Overall, therefore, under Modi we can observe an intensification of bilateral leader-level summits but without any clear trend toward a rejection of multilateralism.

Transnational “People”

The third hypothesis concerns the idea of populist leaders extending the notion of “the people” beyond their country’s borders. In the case of India, it is important to distinguish between those understood as part of the “true people”—namely the Indian diaspora abroad—and the kind of Third World solidarity expressed by previous Indian governments. In fact, whereas Nehru infamously refused any responsibility for the well-being of people of Indian origin living abroad, describing India as a developing country struggling within an inherently unfair international system was one of the core elements of postindependence Indian foreign policy.

Under Modi, however, we have observed a weakening of these elements of the Nehruvian foreign policy tradition and a tilt toward the “West.” His economic outlook includes mercantilist elements as well as a belief in attracting foreign investment and expanding India’s immersion into global markets. Improving relations with the United States already constituted a major priority under the Vajpayee government. In 2015, US President Obama was the “Chief Guest” to India’s Republic Day parade—a symbolic apex of India’s improved relationship with the United States. Overall, Modi is much less willing than previous Indian prime ministers to represent India as the leader of a marginalized and victimized community of the Global South; rather, and again corresponding to the Hindu nationalist preference for more assertive politics, Modi prefers to project an image of India as a great power.

However, Modi’s vigorous pursuit of relating to Indian communities abroad stands out. Although not entirely new—Hindu nationalist organizations began reaching out to the Indian diaspora in the 1980s, the BJP government from 1998–2003 pursued a similar strategy, and Congress maintained some of its innovations (Jaffrelot and Therwath 2007, 293)—Modi’s interest in Indians abroad has been remarkable. For instance, attending diaspora fora during foreign visits has become obligatory. As prime minister, Modi addressed crowds of “Non Resident Indians” (NRI) from London’s Wembley Stadium with almost sixty thousand guests, to New York (nineteen thousand), Singapore (eighteen thousand), and Shanghai (five thousand). The prominence assigned to the diaspora in Modi’s foreign policy was underlined by the introduction of a budget specifically designated for Indian embassies to cultivate diaspora ties. While unifying the Indian “people” worldwide, Modi has tried to harness this resource as a foreign policy tool. Reportedly, the Modi government seeks to introduce voting rights for NRI (Haidar 2015). Indeed, in past elections, the Indian diaspora has proven to be an asset both in terms of fundraising and “cyber support” to the BJP in particular (Jaffrelot and Therwath 2007). Motivating investments by business people of Indian descent appears to be another rationale. Furthermore, the Indian diaspora in some countries have emerged as important lobbies for closer ties, as most visibly in the United States. Less tangibly, in their public pronouncements, Modi, as well as former Foreign Secretary Jaishankar, habitually referred to Hinduism’s—and Indians’—presence across the entire Indo-Pacific region and, from this, deduced a great power status for today’s India. In line with populism’s anti-elitist component, the diaspora has been framed by Modi’s government as an “ambassador” of India, as for instance in Modi’s address to the first

People of Indian Origin (PIO) Parliamentary conference hosted by the MEA in January 2018 in New Delhi (GOI 2018). A transnational understanding of the “people” therefore seems to be a substantial element of innovation in Modi’s foreign policy that directly relates to his populism.

Foreign Policy Actors

Changes to the actual foreign policy-making processes under Modi similarly reflect the expectations derived from an understanding of populism as antipluralist and anti-elitist. In fact, the centralization of decision making, which has been widely described as key component of Modi’s tenure as chief minister in Gujarat, remains one of his most remarkable characteristics (Jaffrelot and Tillin 2017, 187) and contrasts sharply with his predecessor Manmohan Singh’s leadership style. Modi’s Prime Minister’s Office, which includes the national security advisor (NSA), manages foreign affairs directly through the foreign secretary, thereby circumventing External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj. Besides NSA Ajit Doval and BJP party chief Ram Madhav, prior to his retirement in January 2018 Foreign Secretary Jaishankar had become Modi’s chief foreign policy advisor and “personally handled all of Modi’s external engagements” (Katju 2018). At the same time, Swaraj’s visibility has been confined to serving individual Indian citizens in (often trivial) distress abroad (in fact, the external affairs minister visited far fewer capitals than the prime minister)¹¹—to the effect that “the key levers of foreign policy choices are now located in the Prime Minister’s Office and not in the Ministry of External Affairs” (Ganguly 2017, 142). Again, a comparison with the previous BJP-led government is instructive. Although Vajpayee as PM, himself a former minister of external affairs, introduced the position of the NSA and thereby contributed to the centralization within the PM’s office, his minister of external affairs, Jaswant Singh, remained an important figure. By contrast, since Modi took office, the MEA had to contend with learning about the prime minister’s foreign visits after decisions had been taken; preparations for important travels were made without consulting the MEA and often announced via alternative (BJP-run) channels (Haidar 2016), and Modi has made it a habit to greet foreign dignitaries personally upon arrival—a time-consuming affair but one that resonates with his personalistic leadership style. According to some, all of this has resulted in the constant ignorance of the MEA’s capacity and experience.¹² The erosion of foreign ministries’ authority over foreign policy making due to the proliferation of foreign policy actors as well as a tighter control exercised by heads of state has been observable across a variety of nation states, including India under PM Singh. Yet, the extent of centralization under Modi is remarkable, not least since the MEA has traditionally held a paramount position in Indian foreign policy, including far reaching decision-making powers held by its senior officials. The MEA is often seen as an institution particularly devoted to Nehruvian ideals in foreign policy; hence, whereas outflanking the MEA reflects both populism’s anti-elitism and the populist leader’s desire for personal representation, the BJP’s thick ideology—Hindutva’s opposition to Nehruvianism—works hand in hand with populism’s thin ideology.

Interestingly, the downgrading of the MEA has primarily benefitted actors from the security apparatus. Retired police officer and current national security advisor Doval plays an “outsized role in making foreign and security policy” (Ganguly 2017, 142). In stark contrast to his immediate predecessor Shivshankar Menon, a former foreign secretary (the MEA’s top position), Doval made his career in counter terrorism operations and spent the latter part of it in high ranking positions within

¹¹ Personal communication with diplomatic editors from four major Indian English language newspapers on June 2, 2017. Health issues may have played a role in Swaraj’s disinclination to foreign travels.

¹² Personal communication in spring and summer 2017 with two anonymous Indian experts.

the Intelligence Bureau, India's domestic intelligence service. His role in bilateral relations has grown since taking office to the extent that the NSA "himself runs ties in special dialogues with the US, Pakistan, [the United Arab Emirates], China and others" (Haidar 2016). Relations with Pakistan are particularly instructive. Not only was engaging Pakistan on the NSA level a novelty, it also duplicated an ongoing dialogue at the level of foreign secretaries. Foreign secretary talks that took place eventually were then termed as "not official, simply a courtesy" by a government spokesperson in parliament (Haidar 2016). Clearly, the weakening of the MEA—a prime example for an elitist institution with traditionally extremely powerful officials determining foreign policy—is much in line with our hypothesis above. The related centralization of decision making in foreign policy further confirms our expectations.

New Forms of Communication and Involvement

Amongst the Modi government's most striking characteristics is its employment of social media and its circumvention—if not active obstruction—of traditional media outlets such as newspapers and TV broadcasts.¹³ Modi himself has proven to be exceptionally apt at adopting new technologies—from his active Twitter account to 3D holograms during election campaigns. Not only did this contrast starkly with both his predecessor's and his designated rival candidate's public appearances, it also helped in "reshaping his public image as a technology-savvy leader, aligned with the aspirations of a new Indian modernity" (Pal 2015, 1).

Modi's disdain for the press has been widely noted.¹⁴ He famously called journalists "news traders" and a member of his cabinet introduced the term "presstitutes" (Swain 2017). Instead of relying on the traditional media, his election campaign employed social media and other novel means, such as 3D hologram technology, to a degree and scale unprecedented. As prime minister, Modi has not addressed a single press conference in India since taking office, agreed to interviews with domestic media only in a handful of cases,¹⁵ and instead, explains his latest policies in monthly radio addresses. Modi reportedly told his officials to avoid journalists, which has severely restricted journalists' access to official sources. As a result, his "tweets have become the primary news source for Indian media" (Swain 2017). In fact, avoiding direct interaction with the press does not mean absence from the public sphere. Much to the contrary, Modi tweets, uses Facebook, has his own YouTube channel, and is on Instagram. His "image is everywhere: on giant billboards trumpeting new roads and bridges, in full-page newspaper spreads for BJP election campaigns, in television spots touting myriad government programmes" (*The Economist* 2017).

Although more salient in domestic politics, this novel form of public relations has had some repercussions for foreign policy and foreign policy reporting in particular. Modi ended the longstanding practice of journalists accompanying the prime minister on his foreign visits. The MEA has become less accessible for India's diplomatic editors. Meanwhile External Affairs Minister Swaraj was awarded a spot in *Foreign Policy's* list of global thinkers 2016 for "fashioning a novel brand of Twitter diplomacy" (*Foreign Policy* 2016). And whereas Swaraj has been playing a minor role in actual foreign policy making, Modi publicly applauded her social media outreach for giving a "human face" to diplomacy: "If any Indian in distress tweets from anywhere in the world to the External Affairs Ministry, even at two in the night, within

¹³ Accounts on the intimidation of the free media in India under Modi have proliferated in recent years (e.g. *The Economist* 2017). Anecdotal evidence suggests widespread self-censorship amongst journalists and academic researchers.

¹⁴ Personal communication with diplomatic editors from four major Indian English language newspapers on June 2, 2017.

¹⁵ However, he has been more accessible for the international media.

15 minutes Sushma Swaraj replies to it, the government takes prompt action and delivers results. This is good governance" (*Hindu* 2017b).

Populist Foreign Policy: Some Conclusions from the Analysis of the Case of India

This paper sought to develop a first answer to the question of whether there is any such thing as a "populist" foreign policy. What our analysis revealed is that populism does not seem to have much of an immediate impact on the "substance" of foreign policy but that it certainly has important consequences for the "style" and the processes of foreign-policy making.

Overall, being a thin-centered ideology, populism does not allow us to make predictions about specific foreign relationships or the more or less cooperative or conflictive character of a country's bilateral relations with other states. If we want to understand potential elements of change in India's relations with Pakistan or China, for example, the combination of anti-elitism and antipluralism will not be a useful analytical approach. On these issues, the underlying thick ideology of Hindu nationalism and the BJP's history of foreign policy thinking and action are more helpful, for instance when it comes to explaining the current BJP government's more "muscular" approach toward China.

Conceptualizing populism as a thin ideology, however, allowed for the development of some hypotheses on populists' readiness to contribute to global public goods provision and to engage in multilateral forums. Interestingly, both hypotheses were disconfirmed in the Indian case. This is somewhat surprising, given, on the one hand, the hostility toward international institutions and public good provision often displayed by other populists in power and, on the other, India's deep-seated foreign policy tradition of prioritizing domestic development over foreign commitments. The fact that India's populist government has become rather more willing to compromise on global governance issues, despite the costs of public goods provision, highlights that populists' focus on the needs of "the people" in many cases is primarily a rhetorical one. As Müller (2016, 30) puts it, "populists in power . . . often adopt a kind of 'caretaker' attitude toward an essentially passive people," and this might be the case even more so in a field like foreign policy, which is generally more distant from public scrutiny. Thus, on global governance issues, anti-elitism and antipluralism have been of minor importance. India's desire to be recognized as a cooperative great power, and the concomitant expected status gains, seem to weigh more than a promise to "the people" to refrain from costly international commitments.

Interestingly, we could not find much support for the hypothesis concerning populists' skepticism vis-à-vis multilateral institutions either. This could indicate that populists' disregard for intermediary institutions *above* the nation state is dependent on the degree of international authority a populist government is subjected to or, in other words, to its enmeshment in the existing thick web of international institutions. Western populists often perceive international institutions as a limitation to the sovereignty of countries that were and should be "great" on their own. Populist parties across Europe are very critical of the EU's authority in particular and typically portray themselves as defenders of national sovereignty against a transnational, elitist bureaucracy detached from the true people, elements of which also appeared in Trump's address to the UN General Assembly on September 19, 2017. By contrast, non-European populists, given their countries' more limited multilateral engagements, will find it much more difficult to portray international institutions as a transnational, elitist project and a threat to stand up to. Support for multilateralism may in some cases even dovetail with populists' focus on sovereignty if multilateral engagement can be shown to augment a developing country's international status. For example, attacking the UN's authority would run counter to

India's desire for a more prominent global role.¹⁶ Our analysis, thus, suggests that in the absence of meaningful integration in international organizations with a strong supranational character, populists' disregard for intermediary institutions may stop at home. Given the "thin" character of populism, its impact seems to be filtered by other, structural factors, such as a state's position in the global political and economic landscape. The interplay between populism and such structural factors will need further scrutiny in future research on populist foreign policy.

One important finding for the case of India is the confirmation of our exploratory hypothesis on populists' construction (or rediscovery, in the Indian case) of a "transnational people." Diaspora politics have become a core component of Modi's foreign policy, and anecdotal evidence from Turkey suggests that this might not be an isolated phenomenon. In future research, it will be worth exploring in greater detail the impact of transnational populist mobilization, keeping in mind structural differences across cases.

Our other core findings concern the impact of populists' personalistic leadership and communication style on foreign policy outcomes and foreign policy making. The effects of such a centralization of decision making within a small group of advisors—often not members of the traditional foreign policy elite—around the populist leader will need more systematic analysis. As foreign ministries and their bureaucracies have been established to guarantee continuity in countries' foreign policy across changing governments, populists' circumventing and undermining of such institutions could prefigure less predictable foreign policy trajectories. Although difficult to verify, personalization can in fact be expected to eventually impact upon foreign policy substance, even if the overall goals and professed interests remain unchanged. For one, populist personalization will further incentivize foreign governments to establish a personal rapport on the leadership level, the success of which is hardly predictable and thus increases uncertainty (witness Shinzo Abe, Emanuel Macron, and other world leaders trying to establish a personal bond with Donald Trump). Second, centralization with few decision-makers and the corresponding need for prioritization may create bottle necks and thus eventually crowd out issues and foreign relationships that are of only secondary importance to the populist leader's government. As a result, a populist's foreign policy may become less comprehensive and consistent in terms of both the effective pursuit of issues globally and the cultivation of bilateral relationships, when compared to a non-populist government. This would contrast, however, with the finding that populists' anti-elitism and antipluralism do not necessarily seem to lead to specific changes in the substance of foreign policy. Future research will need to cover longer time spans in order to further theorize under what conditions structural factors and other imperatives will prevail and whether the seemingly erratic foreign-policy moves of populists like Trump or Duterte are just a matter of style but ultimately do not lead to substantial foreign-policy shifts.

Our analysis also has confirmed that populist leaders devise new formats to get in touch directly with the people they claim to represent, including on foreign policy issues. Further comparative analyses will need to be carried out to verify to what extent these are peculiarities of the Indian case, but initial evidence from other cases, such as the US under Trump, suggest that these are broader trends. Obviously, these issues also have a high degree of practical relevance when dealing with current and future populists in power in different parts of the world. For instance, the marginalization of traditional media outlets in the communication of a populist's foreign policy may reduce foreign actors' very capacity of understanding (and predicting) the respective government's actions. And the almost exclusive use of direct communication via social media (and radio) aimed primarily at a domestic audience may

¹⁶ By contrast, Duterte called the UN high commissioner for human rights an "idiot" and threatened to "burn down the U.N." (Villamor 2016).

also have, eventually, repercussions for the actual foreign policy substance. That could be the case once popular opinion and elite assessments on particular foreign policy issues diverge. One may safely presume that populists differ in terms of whether they merely claim or truly seek to represent their people's will. Yet, if communication, however one-sided, with the leader's support base is direct and intermediaries (a country's "strategic community") tend to be circumvented, one may indeed expect a stronger influence of the "popular" will and, in particular, of the populist's core support base, with relatively little regard for (or understanding of) a country's tradition of foreign policy thinking. In such cases, the popular interpretation of a country's interests as well as of the populist's thick ideology may overrule traditional foreign policy precepts or past practices.

Finally, responding to individual citizens' distress abroad on social media, as spearheaded by Minister of External Affairs Swaraj, not only "popularizes" but may also (unnecessarily or not) politicize consular affairs and individual citizens' fates, with concrete effects on the bilateral relations of concerned states. Thus, due to populists' superior use of social media, we can expect an increase of cases in which bilateral relations are taken hostage by individual citizens' calamities abroad—be they tourists, migrant workers, or businesspeople.

To conclude, while populism has a limited direct impact on the "substance" of foreign policy, its considerable impact on the processes and the style of foreign policy making as well as on its communication can be expected to have substantive implications in the longer term. Further comparative studies will need to assess those implications and to apply our hypotheses to a broader range of cases of populists in power.

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